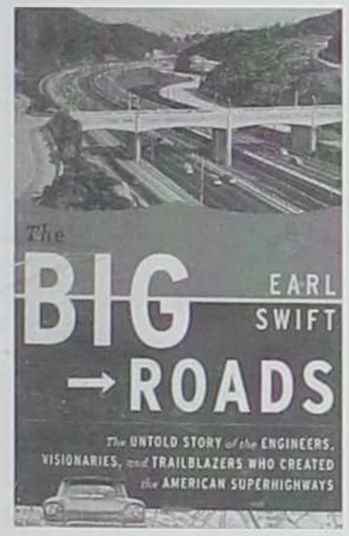

Reading the Past: America's Superhighways

IN THE LAST HALF of the 19th century, as railroads spread across Iowa, they transformed the economic, social, and physical landscape. They also determined the fate of the communities they passed through—or passed by. Recognizing their influence, generations of historians and other writers have produced countless shelves of books examining every conceivable facet of railroad history.

In the last half of the 20th century, interstate highways bisected Iowa north to south and east to west (and bisected its capital city as well). Those highways, like the railroads that preceded them, dramatically altered the fate of small towns, big-city downtowns, urban neighborhoods, and so-called edge cities and flattened the landscape for those who traveled on them through rural America. Yet historians have paid little attention so far to these transformations. So Earl Swift's engaging history, *The Big Roads: The Untold Story of the Engineers, Visionaries, and Trailblazers Who Created the American Superhighways*, is especially welcome.

Swift leavens what could be a dry bureaucratic story with lively anecdotes, colorful characters (such as Carl Fisher and his promotion of automobile travel), and telling statistics. He celebrates the engineers who created the interstate highway system—noting that "the system's nearly forty-seven thousand miles represent the greatest single investment that the American people have made in public works"—but he does not ignore its critics, singling out the cultural critic Lewis Mumford in particular for significant attention.

One of the heroes of the story is native Iowan Thomas MacDonald, who was chief of the Federal Bureau of Public Roads from 1919 to 1953 and mastermind of the interstate highway system, which was authorized by the Federal Highway Act of 1956. But half of the book addresses highway developments before the act was passed. The advantage of Swift's long view is to reaffirm what history does best: show us how we got from the past to the present. We see the layers of precedent that preceded the present system of interstate highways. It was not created from scratch.

A big part of the point of all this buildup is to insist that Dwight Eisenhower "was not, by any means, the father of the interstates. . . . The system was a done deal in every important respect but financing by the time Ike entered politics." Swift clearly doesn't think much of Ike. "He entered the Oval Office professing an interest in building 'a network of modern roads,' rating it 'as necessary to defense as it is to our national economy and personal safety' but having conducted little, if any, research on the subject. He didn't know that the executive and legislative branches had already worked out the details of the network he sought. He had no idea that the Bureau of Public Roads had produced two reports, more than a decade before, that spelled out its design and approximate footprints. His own views about highways were at odds with those of the government's experts: unaware that the greatest need for expressways was in cities, he favored a strictly rural network; and not knowing that the bureau had concluded that a national program could not be financed with tolls, he favored 'self-liquidating' highway projects, or those that generated the revenue to repay their costs." And the crucial legislation itself "bore little resemblance to the bill Ike had sponsored; the chief contributor to the system's financing in the executive branch wasn't the president, but Frank Turner."

Perhaps ironically, MacDonald, from rural Iowa, had long resisted Eisenhower's preferred path of making large expenditures on roads through sparsely populated, rural areas, preferring instead to prioritize spending where it was most needed according to his careful statistical analyses: in and near urban centers. After Ike forced MacDonald to retire from the scene, an unknown bureaucrat named Frank Turner continued this research-driven model. Turner "more than anyone else, [midwived] a conceptual network of superhighways into the concrete and steel octopus that now spans the continent." Turner took great pride in an aspect of the system that is one of its most criticized: it was "so uniform you can't tell what state you are in except as you look at the sign." Swift puts this in context, noting that "travel had been moving toward monotony for a long time," whether by foot, horse, stagecoach, train, or car.

The later chapters of the book are largely devoted to battles over the location of urban highways. Swift also addresses the interstate system's effects on small towns and their businesses—it "diverts traffic away from former arteries of travel, drains the life's blood from established firms which are situated on the old highways and leaves them to die." He notes briefly the effects on farmers: Iowa's "710 miles of freeway would devour 26,000 acres of productive cropland, or more than forty square miles" and divide farms, "isolating pieces beyond four lanes of impenetrable concrete and rebar" and forcing farmers to travel miles to reach former adjoining properties.

Anyone interested in how "the big roads" have transformed our lives will appreciate Swift's *Big Roads*.

— by Marvin Bergman, editor, *The Annals of Iowa*